Commemoration as Critique: Remaking Institutional Narratives through Archaeology Exhibition

University archaeologists studying their own institutions face a persistent challenge that represents a discipline-wide concern. How do we critique persistent dominant narratives surrounding racism, patriarchy, and colonialism without alienating some of the constituencies we serve? Moments of commemoration throw this dilemma into high relief. They represent excellent opportunities for public engagement. Yet the very institutional mythologies they celebrate can perpetuate exclusionary founding narratives. What is the role of engaged public archaeology and museum anthropology during such celebrations? Commemorative archaeological exhibits at Stanford University and Harvard University model a path forward in this wider disciplinary project. Details of these exhibitions reveal how a carefully constructed, collaborative curatorial process puts concepts of decolonization, materiality, and multivocality on display. Curators are then able to produce a new, critical consideration of their own community’s “founding” that both celebrates and critiques damaging institutional mythos. These case studies invite further reflection on how even celebratory commemorative exhibitions can serve as disruptive heritage practice.

Portrait (left) by L.A. Cicero, Stanford News; exhibit (above) Christina J. Hodge, Stanford University Archaeology Collections